DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 145 417 CS 203 464

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TITLE Reports on Political Influence of the Press; and Agenda-Setting Influence in an Off-Year Election. News Research Bulletin No. 4.
INSTITUTION American Newspaper Publishers Association, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Nov 76
NOTE 11p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elections; *Mass Media; *Media Research; *News Media; *Newspapers; *Political Influences; Political Issues; Politics; *Television
IDENTIFIERS *Agenda Setting

ABSTRACT

The two articles in this document deal with the political influence of the press during political campaigns. The first article explores the findings of agenda-setting studies, especially those comparing the agenda-setting effects of television and newspapers, and concludes that, since newspapers are the most important source of public agendas, agenda setting may be the most important effect of mass communication. The second article discusses a Chicago-area study of an off-year (1974) congressional race. Findings of this study suggest that the media not only report the relative importance of issues but also increase the number of issues on the public's priority list. (JM)

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AMERICAN NEWSPAPER PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION
P.O. Box 17407, Dulles International Airport, Washington, D.C. 20041
Joe D. Smith Jr., Chairman — **Jerry W. Friedheim**, General Manager

News Research Bulletin **No. 4** **November 10, 1976**

ED145417

Reports On

Political Influence of the Press

and

Agenda-Setting Influence
In an Off-Year Election

This issue of the News Research Bulletin reports two studies dealing with the political influence of the press during political election campaigns.

The first article, written by William Glavin, a member of the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University and formerly employed by newspapers in New York and Boston, discusses the idea of an agenda-setting function of the press. He reviews some of the evidence that has accumulated over the years.

The second article, written by Anne K. Hilker, a candidate for both a law degree and a masters in communication management degree at the University of Southern California, reports on a specific Chicago-area study from the 1974 off-year elections. The report was prepared from data gathered by Miss Hilker and some of her classmates under the direction of Kristin McGrath at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University.

Political Influence of the Press
by
William Glavin

"All I know is what I read in the papers."

—Will Rogers

The prevailing opinion in America is that the media greatly affect the way voters think about issues and candidates. We need only look at the way our public servants and would-be public ser-

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vants alternately court and curse the press to see that politicians are convinced that their futures are greatly affected by what the press says about their presence. Indeed, candidates spend vast sums of money for the services of image makers, media experts who specialize in making people look good to the voters through the media.

But is there any evidence that the media have this power so often ascribed to them? Can the media shape public opinion? Can they tell people what to think about politicians and campaign issues? Can they influence people's beliefs about which issues are important?

Since 1940, social scientists have attempted to answer these questions, and although the research continues, some answers have been found.

In essence, while press coverage of an issue fails to change people's position on that issue, the coverage greatly influences people's beliefs as to whether or not that issue is important. For example, continuous coverage of abortion will not change the voters' positions on abortion, but it will make voters believe that the issue is important. The media cannot tell us what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about. This ability of the media to tell us what to think about is called the agenda-setting function of mass communication, because the media, in effect, set the agenda of issues for the voters.

In addition to supporting these findings about agenda-setting, some recent studies have discovered that newspapers are more of an agenda-setting force than is television. These studies show that the issues people believe to be important are, in almost all cases, those that have been covered by newspapers, and that when there are discrepancies between what issues newspapers and television cover, people's priorities are set more by the newspaper coverage.

The discovery of the media's agenda-setting function did not occur until more than 20 years after social scientists began conducting empirical studies into the effects of mass communication. The first social scientists to study the media believed that the press could change people's attitudes about issues to a significant, perhaps startling, degree, and they aimed their research at either verifying or refuting this belief. Beginning with the benchmark Erie County study during the 1940 presidential campaign (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet), their beliefs began to change. That study and other precise, quantitative research into the effects of mass communication in election campaigns indicated that the media failed to change voter attitudes. The studies conducted during the '40s and '50s indicated that regardless of what the press said about an issue or candidate, people who felt one way at the be-

ginning of a campaign almost invariably felt the same way at the end of the campaign.

So, the social scientists, faced with all of this evidence, did an about face. By 1960, most of them believed that the press had little or no effect on people's attitudes, that the press was, in effect, an impotent giant.

Taking a New Look

But in the 1960's, social scientists began looking at the press in a different way, asking different questions about its effects. Instead of asking whether the press changed people's attitudes, as the earlier researchers had, these researchers asked whether the press affected people's awareness and perception of issues. Rather than asking about attitude change, social scientists began asking about cognitive change.

And the new questions brought surprising new answers. Research indicated that the press greatly influenced people's beliefs about the relative importance of issues. In a political campaign, the studies showed, press coverage determines which issues the voters believe are important: what the press covers, the voters feel is important.

The agenda-setting theory asserts that the press not only makes the public aware of the issues of a campaign, but also sets the public's priorities. If the press covers one issue heavily for a long period of time, the public will regard that issue as important; if the press ignores an issue, or gives it little attention, the public will regard that issue as unimportant.

The first attempt at empirical verification of agenda-setting was undertaken by McCombs and Shaw during the 1968 presidential campaign. Their research was designed to find whether there was a correlation between the issues that the press emphasized during the campaign and the issues that the voters believed important. Among undecided voters in Chapel Hill, N.C., where the research was conducted, the study showed that substantial correlations existed. As the press increased its coverage of various issues, the undecided voters began to perceive those issues as important. The research also indicated that voters' beliefs about which were the major issues of the campaign reflected the agenda set by the media, rather than those set by the three presidential candidates (Nixon, Humphrey and Wallace), each of whom was emphasizing different issues. In fact, the results showed that even those voters leaning toward one candidate agreed more closely with the agenda set up by media coverage than with the one that could be inferred from the candidate's statements.

Similar results were found in a major agenda-setting study conducted in Charlotte, N.C., during the 1972 campaign and by two major Syracuse University studies that are examining voters and media in four states during the 1976 campaign. In addition, these later studies have discovered several interesting corollaries to the agenda-setting concept:

(1) Agenda setting is dependent upon the frequency of exposure to the media. A person who reads newspapers daily is more likely to adopt the press's agenda as his own than is a person who reads newspapers less often.

(2) Individuals do not constantly shift their agendas on the basis of daily newspaper stories. Rather, their judgments of which issues are important are based on long-term exposure. So if an issue is given heavy coverage for one or two days, it is unlikely that the voters will consider it significant. If, on the other hand, the issue is covered for several months, the voters are likely to believe it is important.

Newspapers and Television

One of the most interesting findings of the recent agenda-setting studies has been that newspapers are far more effective than television in setting the public agenda. The original McCombs and Shaw study found no significant differences between the influence of newspapers and television, but several more recent studies by the same men and others suggest that such differences frequently exist. These studies have indicated that significant differences are not always present, but that when they are, voters' agendas almost without exception parallel those of newspapers more closely than those of television.

These findings have been verified by several studies. Tipton, Haney and Baseheart in 1975 compared media and voter agendas in the early phase of a gubernatorial campaign with those in the late phase of the same campaign. They found consistent similarities between newspaper agendas and personal agendas during both periods of the campaign, but few or no similarities between television agendas and personal agendas. And these findings even applied to persons who said they depended primarily upon television for their political news.

Similar findings of an agenda-setting effect for newspapers, but not for television, have been reported by McClure and Patterson from their studies of voters in Syracuse during the 1972 presidential campaign and by Mullins from his study of young voters on the University of North Carolina campus during the 1972 campaign.

There are at least three potential explanations for these find-

ings, and they are not mutually exclusive:

(1) The nature of the media competition in the cities studied could have had an effect. Individual television stations and newspapers differ tremendously in the quality of their journalistic products. While the odds seem to favor television in the match between network news and local newspaper coverage of national issues, preliminary evidence indicates that newspapers have more effect. In the match between television coverage and newspaper coverage of local issues, the odds generally, but not always, would seem to favor newspapers.

(2) The audiences for newspapers and television differ somewhat, and the differences might account for differences in agenda-setting effects.

(3) The nature of the media themselves might have an effect. Both McCombs and Shaw and McClure and Patterson studies have commented that some of the characteristics of television news make it less efficient as a teacher of the relative importance of issues. While a newspaper reader can proceed at his own pace, rereading and thinking again about information if he desires; the television viewer must follow a series of stories, presented in rapid succession.

Too, television's less comprehensive coverage could be a factor. A television newscast is, in many ways, the equivalent of a newspaper's front page. Only the most important stories are covered. And long before a story merits coverage on television or on the front page, the story often has been covered on the inside pages of a newspaper. So the newspaper reader may have been exposed to the story several times before it is mentioned on television. This is especially important in light of the finding, mentioned earlier, that frequent exposure to a story over a long period of time is necessary to affect a person's agenda.

Another Level of Influence

In an attempt to further compare the agenda-setting effects of newspapers and television, researchers have broken down various issues into sets of sub-issues and characteristics. For example, the issue of the economy can be broken down into such sub-issues as inflation, unemployment, balance of payments, etc.

In 1975, two researchers, Benton and Frazier, conducted a study to determine which of the sub-issues of a national issue—the economy—were important to Minneapolis residents, and to compare the effectiveness of newspapers and television in placing these sub-issues on the public agenda. The study looked at three different elements—the broad issue (the economy), sub-issues of

that issue (inflation, Arab oil prices, unemployment and tax rebates) and specific information concerning each of these sub-issues, including proposed solutions to problems that were included among the sub-issues.

Dividing their respondents according to which medium, television or newspapers, was their most important source of information about the economy, Benton and Frazier found a substantial correlation (.81) between the sub-issue public agenda and the sub-issue newspaper agenda, but only a weak correlation (.27) between the sub-issue public agenda and the sub-issue television agenda. Using the same technique to test for the salience of specific information, they again found a substantial correlation (.68) between public and newspaper agendas and a weak correlation (.08) between public and television agendas. These findings indicate that newspapers, not television, set the public agenda for sub-issues that are parts of other, broader issues.

This is not to say, of course, that television has no effect in setting the public agenda. In some of the studies mentioned above, correlations between public agendas and television agendas were found. In others, such correlations existed at certain times during the campaigns but not at others.

It is clear, nonetheless, that newspapers are the most important source of public agendas. The research conducted thus far clearly indicates that newspaper coverage does influence voter perception of the importance of issues. In fact, the evidence is so strong, and its implications so significant, that agenda-setting may be the most important effect of mass communication.

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Agenda-Setting Influence In an Off-Year Election

by

Anne K. Hilker

The 1974 off-year congressional race between Democrat Abner Mikva and Republican Samuel Young in Illinois' 10th District was closely watched. The fate of incumbent Young—elected two years earlier by a strongly Republican and largely conservative, wealthy North Shore constituency—served for many as an index of Republican strength following the Watergate scandals. The match was a replay of the 1972 campaign—Mikva and Young battled that year in the same territory—except that in 1974 Mikva barely topped Young with 50.84 percent of the vote.

Residents of the 10th Congressional District have access to three metropolitan daily newspapers and their suburban supplements, 28 community newspapers and a host of electronic media outlets—not to mention media with national circulations—for political information. What agenda-setting role did these media play?

Comparisons of the key issues reported in these news media with the 13 issues cited by 10th District voters as most important to them yielded an overall correlation of .56, good evidence for the agenda-setting function of the press.

Agendas for Mikva voters and Young voters also were compiled. Borrowing from the original McCombs and Shaw study, the strength of the agenda-setting function also may be tested by determining if attention to, and agreement with, media agendas are greater when controlled by party:

> **If . . . the voters attend reasonably well to *all* the news, *regardless* of which candidate or party is stressed, the correlations between the voter and total media content would be strongest. This would be evidence of the agenda-setting function. (McCombs and Shaw, p. 182.)**

There is mixed evidence of agenda-setting when this comparison is made. For Young voters, the correlation with content in general (.57) is much greater than the Young-related content correlation (.31). But for the Mikva voters, the correlation of the media content in general is .41, much less than the .66 correlation with Mikva content. (See Table 1.)

Table 1
Comparisons of Voter Agendas and News Agendas

	All Content	Young Content	Mikva Content
All voters	.56	.31*	.65
Young voters	.57	.31*	.59
Mikva voters	.41*	.15*	.66

* Significance level: .05.

(The information on voter agendas came from a random sample of 363 voters interviewed in person on election day as they left the polls. The information on press agendas came from a content analysis of Chicago-area media from Oct. 1 through Nov. 5, 1974. Some 751 mentions of the congressional race were found in the three metropolitan dailies, 28 community newspapers, and three television stations. There was no mention of the race on one TV station monitored nor in any of the three national news magazines.)

Of particular interest in the analysis are the consistently high correlations of all survey agendas with the Mikva (Democratic) media content and their contrast with the low levels for the Young (Republican) media content. The phenomenon of lower correlations among Republicans and news of their party also occurred in the original McCombs and Shaw study. This phenomenon is perhaps best explained by McLeod *et al.'s* definition of agenda-setting, the creations by the media of a "court" for "political games" which is more favorable to one candidate than the other. The general voter agenda more closely paralleled the Mikva media content than the general content; by a slight margin, so did the agenda of the Young voters. Yet the agenda of the Young voters received the highest correlation score in the group with the general content agenda, and the correlation between Young voters and Young content was much less than that between Young voters and Mikva content. Together, these figures suggest that the court structured by the media in this campaign was most favorable to Mikva, and—although nothing is proved here—the suggestion that this influenced the outcome of the race is tempting.

The Individual Voter

Among voters for each candidate, how does level of political interest affect agenda-setting? Though not always statistically significant, the correlations are consistently higher for all three media agendas (general, Mikva and Young) among voters with low

interest. Voters of low interest tend to have agendas more closely related to those of the media. The .83 correlation between the agendas of voters with high interest and low interest serves to underline the fact that the election was close and general agreement on issues high among voters and candidates. As in the general data analyzed above, Mikva correlations are consistently higher than those for Young. (See Table 2.)

Table 2
Agenda Comparisons by Level of Political Interest

	All Content	Mikva Content	Young Content
Voter agendas, high interest	.32*	.60*	-.03*
Voter agendas, low interest	.41*	.68*	.13*

* Significance level: .05.

Another way to check agenda-setting influence among voters is to compare agenda correlations between those who said they were influenced by the mass media and those who were not. Higher correlations would be expected among those who admitted being influenced by the media than among those who did not.

This is, in fact, what happens. In three of the four comparisons, agendas of voters influenced by the media correlate more strongly with both candidate media agendas and the general media agenda. (See Table 3.)

Table 3
Agenda Comparisons by Self-Reports of Press Influence

	Mikva Voters		Young Voters	
	Influenced	Not influenced	Influenced	Not influenced
General content	.34	.49	.63	.51
Mikva content	.68	.66	--	--
Young content	--	--	.35*	.23*

* Significance level: .05.

Work in agenda-setting has been primarily vertical, testing the similarity of issue ranking among voters and media. But agenda-setting has depth as well as height. Not only did those influenced by the media show greater agreement with the media agendas, they also showed greater breadth in awareness of issues.

In all but two of 26 possible comparisons, as shown in Table 4, the percentage of influenced voters mentioning an issue was greater than voters in the non-influenced group. This finding suggests the addition of a horizontal dimension to agenda-setting: not only do the media tell us the relative importance of issues, they also increase the number of issues on our priority lists.

Table 4
Percentage of Voters Mentioning Each Issue as Important

	Mikva voters		Young voters	
	Influenced	Not influenced	Influenced	Not influenced
Busing	21%	8%	30%	14%
Amnesty	29	25	14	17
Equal rights	53	46	37	26
Crime	25	24	51	36
Pollution	49	34	31	24
Metro problems	27	28	15	10
Cost of living	62	57	73	64
Energy	50	25	34	33
Watergate	34	25	13	6
Israel	28	16	15	5
Honesty	59	58	54	46
Unemployment	41	32	28	24
Government spending	49	39	63	58

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